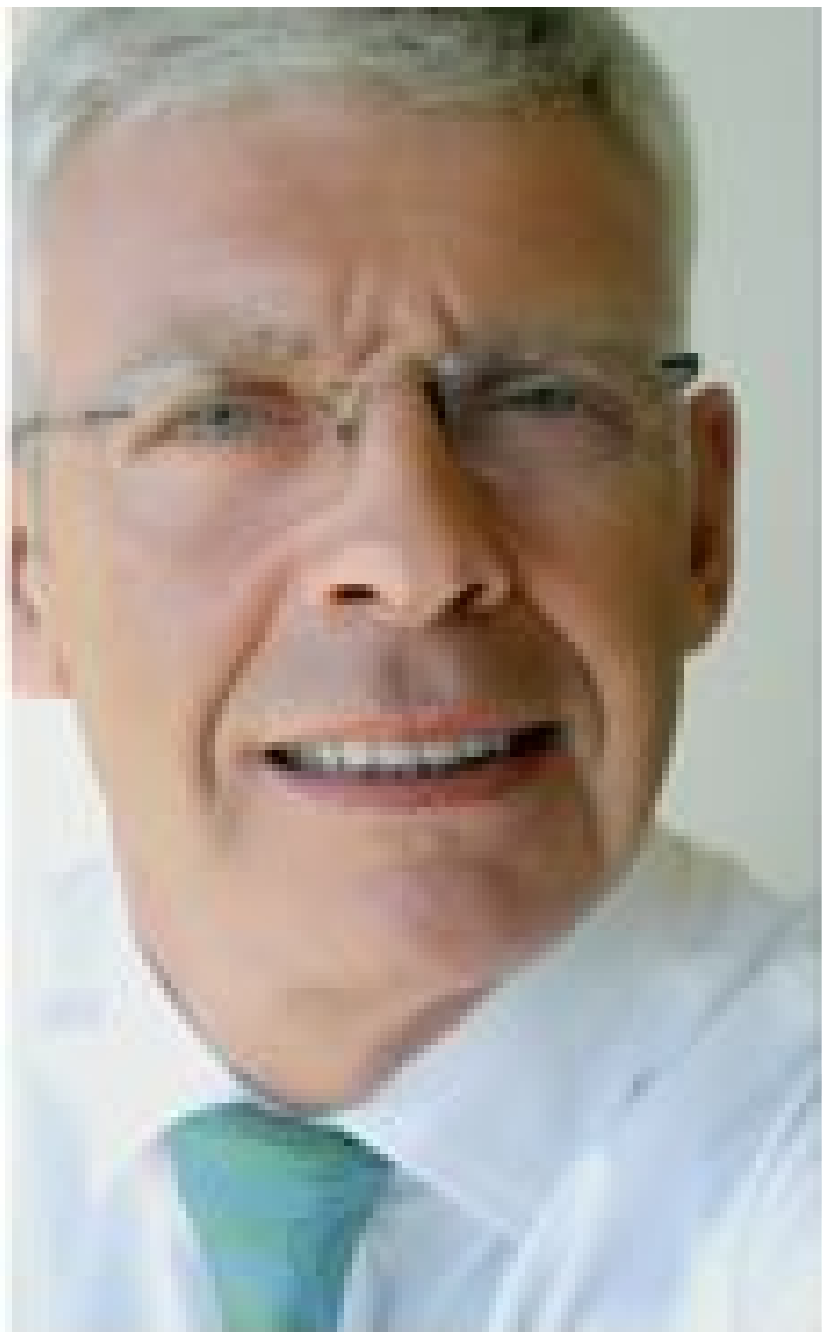


# HAVE WE SEEN THE END OF THE BATTLE FOR TALENT?, ROMANA SADURSKA

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“The nature of legal services will continue to evolve and improve but the driver for innovative change should now be the clients themselves.”



## **Law firms must continue to educate, train and motivate their lawyers in the downturn or risk repercussions when the economic upturn comes, says Romana Sadurska of Uría Menéndez**

The way in which human resources departments of law firms have responded to the economic downturn has drawn much attention this year. Entry deferrals, lay offs, recruitment and salary freezes and cut-downs in bonuses have become the norm.

Suddenly, law firms that a year ago seemed more concerned about retaining lawyers than acquiring new business, were behaving as if lawyers should feel lucky they still had a job.

Those who are contemplating deploying the same remedies in 2010 should think twice.

To start with, students took note. As recent job fairs indicate, fewer students are considering the possibility of applying for a position in a law firm. A drastic reduction in recruitment figures inevitably leads to a mid-term decapitalisation of a law firm. One does not form a good lawyer overnight. It takes years of 'apprenticeship', strong personal motivation and considerable investment by firms. Added to this, past experience shows that when the economy turns around and new opportunities appear, lawyers tend to leave, many of them burned out and disillusioned with the management's policies in times of recession and the resulting employment uncertainty.

So what firms should do is continue recruiting and ensure they manage their associates careers well.

However, we should also improve our recruitment systems in order to reduce the margin of error. Not only because the cost of choosing the wrong candidates is high (associates compensation, training, facilities, etc are financial burdens that may never be repaid), but because our clients are becoming both more cost-conscious and more sophisticated. They tend more and more often to use various external lawyers, depending on the complexity and degree of expertise required. They expect flexible fees reflecting value generated for them: different levels for 'routine' type work and for specialised, strategic and 'custom made' advice. And if the firms want to be commissioned for the 'top shelf' matters, they need to have the very best lawyers capable of delivering top quality services.

As clients become more sophisticated, lawyers also need to refine their awareness of their consumers needs, become more involved in business development, learn to be more efficient and fulfil ever-more taxing compliance obligations. In addition, senior lawyers must continue being 'maestros' for their younger colleagues, dedicating much energy to training and tutorship.

La manera en que los departamentos de recursos humanos de los despachos han reaccionado a la recesión económica ha acaparado la atención. Aplazamientos en nuevas incorporaciones, despidos, congelación de sueldos y recortes en los bonus, ha sido la norma general del mercado. Los despachos, sin embargo, deben continuar reclutando, formando y motivando a sus abogados jóvenes en tiempos de crisis o si no pagarán las consecuencias cuando se produzca la recuperación de la economía, comenta Romana Sadurska de Uría Menéndez.

All this requires a string of competencies that, for reasons which are difficult to comprehend, are referred to as 'soft'. One does not find such lawyers under every stone.

Moreover, it takes time and effort to coach them to become leaders.

Even commoditised products, day-to-day advice or management of transactions, litigation and arbitration, all of which are important for crossselling, sustaining client satisfaction and training young associates, have to be delivered efficiently and to the highest standards of quality. Lawyers who can do this work are not easy to come by.

A healthy supply of highly-qualified lawyers, who are equally capable of delivering excellent advice, attracting business and effectively managing client relationships, is only possible if firms keep on looking for the best and most motivated students – and above all, if firms manage the professional development of their associates with a good dose of sense and sensitivity (especially for their work-life balance). This is always essential, but even more so when the going gets tough.

Associates should feel that they continue growing professionally and that they are valued. Firms should improve the training and mentoring provided by the partners, keep their associates busy, if necessary, deploying them to other areas of practice, encouraging them to improve their language skills, take up postgraduate degrees, give seminars, publish, etc.

Firms should ensure that associates receive appropriate guidance and that their potential is fully developed.

Hence, the answer to the question in the title of this article is not only that the battle for talent is not over, but actually winning it is more important than ever.

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